

...a life in letters

If I am to be Remembered: The Life and Work of Julian Huxley with Selected Correspondence

by Krishna R. Dronamraju, *World Scientific*, pp 294, £27

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TO DESCRIBE Sir Julian Huxley as prolific might be to do him an injustice. True, there simply weren't enough pies into which he could poke a finger, but it is typical that a short film he co-produced, *The Private Life of the Gannet*, won him an Oscar. The title of this book is taken from Huxley's own reflections on his life: "If I am to be remembered, I hope it will not be primarily for my specialist scientific work, but as a generalist; one to whom nothing human and nothing in external nature was alien." So I found the concentration on Huxley's biological work a disappointing puzzle. Although it serves as a good example of his scientific interests, it leaves out many of his other pursuits.

We know Huxley is known for his popularisation of science, but there are precious

few examples of this work here, and then when they appear they are mostly digests. The collection of his correspondence seems similarly uninspired. It does reveal the extent to which he and his colleagues debated fine points of research in their letters, and the frequency with which Huxley took his correspondents to task for failing to mention his work in their publications.

Krishna Dronamraju does not hide his admiration for Huxley, but it appears as tedious repetitions of Huxley's accomplishments. He includes a wealth of superfluous detail, such as a complete listing of birds that Huxley spotted in Africa, or his views on the state of the swan's pond in London Zoo. Huxley's life was varied and attractive; it does not need this embroidery.

He achieved much, including helping to found ethology through his pioneering work with the great crested grebe, founding the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, working as the first director-general of UNESCO, his pioneering work in allometry, introducing new terms in taxonomy, writing a seminal work on evolution, as well as expounding on his

humanist philosophy. He also found time to write a well-regarded book of poetry. So many activities of such importance are impressive, but should be seen in the context of his background (his influential family, his education at Eton and Oxford).

Readers may be disappointed by the brief treatment of Huxley's espousal of eugenics, which may be excused in view of its popularity at the time among even progressive intellectuals. Huxley considered the control of population "the most important task facing mankind", a highly dubious view with which Dronamraju unfortunately appears to have some sympathy.

This book is well-intentioned but lacks sparkle, never matching its subject's brilliance. Huxley was a man who was excited by ideas, which resulted in a satisfying and productive life. But the most pleasing comment on Huxley's life comes from his pupil E. B. Ford, who is quoted as saying: "He would always speak of a friend better behind his back than to his face: few indeed deserve such a tribute". □

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